"Native people were fighting for this country before they were given the right to vote. We were fighting for our land."

-Billy Nicholas, Passamaquoddy Governor, Indian Township

Headline News: Veterans

Brenda Commander, the chief of the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, reads the names of tribal members who have served in the armed forces. The tribe held a ceremony Monday to mark Native American Veterans Day in the state. This was the inaugural event for the band, as Gov. John Baldacci signed a bill in April to establish June 21 of each year as Native American Veterans Day in Maine. Bangor Daily News, photo by Jen Lynds.

American Indians have served as members in every branch of the armed forces since the creation of the United States. Many Native communities honor veterans in a number of ways, recognizing them at events and ceremonies, and honoring them at community gatherings. Some tribes have a long legacy of warrior societies, and service in the military was a natural extension of cultural values. The Wabanaki did not have warrior societies, yet military service has played an important part in Wabanaki history.

Tribe member seeks separate Veterans Day

*Bangor Daily News - February 17, 2009*

Penobscot Nation veterans are honored for their service by community members and the U.S. Army at a ceremony at the Penobscot Community Center on Indian Island on Thursday, Dec. 10, 2009. Penobscot Nation Chief Kirk Francis was also honored with a U.S. Army Freedom Team Salute Supporter commendation, the first time such recognition has been given to a Native American Head of Nation. Bangor Daily News, photo by Bridget Brown.
Maine

The Maliseet, Micmac, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot people have served in every armed conflict since the Revolutionary War, and in larger numbers, per capita, than the non-Native population. This dedication to military service is all the more impressive in light of the refusal by the U.S. Government even to recognize American Indians as citizens until 1924. Moreover, Native peoples in Maine were not granted the right to vote in federal elections until 1954, nor in state elections until 1967.

In 2003 the federal government designated November 7 as Native American Veterans Day, and in April 2009 Maine passed its own version of the law recognizing Wabanaki veterans for their courage and service each year on June 21. Passamaquoddy representative to the state legislature Donald Soctomah introduced the bill, citing the history of Wabanaki people fighting for this country when they were not even allowed to vote.

In Their Own Words

"The tribe doesn’t offer any specific services for veterans. This was the first year we have been recognized."
-Kenneth Hanning, Maliseet

"The new bill has brought awareness to our Native American veterans that’s long overdue, even within our own community. It has helped us as individual members to know who served, and gave us the opportunity to acknowledge them."
-Brenda Commander, Maliseet
Chief, Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians

"I hold these people in the highest regard. You can’t talk about the history of the United States without talking about the Wabanaki being involved with every conflict."
-Kirk Francis, Penobscot
Chief, Penobscot Indian Nation

"We haven’t recognized our veterans to the fullest, but we’re changing that by creating a memorial that will open in the spring, and recognizing them at events. The bill that was passed was a good effort, but what happens from here is up to us."
-Billy Nicholas, Passamaquoddy
Governor, Indian Township
Appendix A

Veterans: In Their Own Words

Passamaquoddy Civil War veteran Peter W. Mitchell and his wife Alice. Photo courtesy of Joseph Nicholas, Waponahki Museum.

"Nothing has really been done for our veterans until about eight months ago, and that’s sad. Last year we had a dinner, which was nice, but only about a dozen veterans came and I think there are more in the community. Their concern is that we don’t have a graveyard for our people with a designated area for the veterans. We are trying to buy some land for this."

-Victoria Higgins, Micmac Chief, Aroostook Band of Micmacs

"For me there isn’t an “us against them” mentality. We live in America, we go to their schools, we live in their society. We are a part of the landscape. For me, serving in the military was more of an assertion of my place in this landscape rather than asserting my otherness from this society."

-James Eric Francis, Sr., Penobscot Tribal Historian, Penobscot Indian Nation

"Native American Veterans Day is important because it puts Native people and Native veterans on the radar, and every time we have a chance to be seen it’s good. It’s good to be recognized as human and contributing to our society."

-Donna Loring, Penobscot

"It’s been within the last five years or so that the Penobscot have started honoring veterans. I never thought of serving as a conflict of interest, that would have been a luxury! I just needed something to survive. Initial needs have to be met first, and then later things like patriotism come in."

-Donna Loring, Penobscot
"I have had to reconnect myself with my community and my people again because I have been away in the military service for twenty years, followed by forty years living in Vienna, Austria, the home of my wife, where I was also employed by the International Atomic Energy Agency for twenty years. When I ask someone their name, I have to ask who their parents were, and in some cases even who their grandparents were to make a connection as to who they are and what family they come from."

-Charles Norman Shay, Penobscot

"I think the military and the people of this country honor Native Americans for their service to this country. That makes me feel good. I never had a problem with discrimination in over twenty years of military service."

-Charles Norman Shay, Penobscot
Appendix B

Veteran Headlines

Merci beaucoup: Penobscot Indian elder Charles (Norman) Shay to receive France’s highest honor

By Aimee Dolloff - Bangor Daily News - November 6, 2007 (Charles Norman) Shay is a direct descendant of Chief Joseph Orono, who was an ally of George Washington during the Revolutionary War. He also is the grandson (sic) of a French trapper, Jean-Vincent d’Abadie, Baron of Saint-Castin, who married the daughter of the great Chief of the Penobscot tribe in 1678. Shay, now 83, was a combat medic in the 1st Infantry Division of the U.S. Army. He was part of the first wave of soldiers to arrive at Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944. He subsequently participated in the battles of Mons, Aachen, the Hurtgen Forest and the Bulge. After crossing the Remagen Bridge on March 25, 1945, Shay was captured and spent six weeks as a prisoner of war.

On Wednesday [he] will be present when newly appointed French President Nicholas Sarcozy addresses a joint session of Congress. Shay will be given the title of Knight of the Legion of Honor.

Maliseets mark Native American Veterans Day

Bangor Daily News - June 23, 2009 A solemn crowd gathered at the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians’ reservation Monday afternoon as the tribe marked Native American Veterans Day in the state.

The bill’s primary sponsor, tribal Rep. Donald Soctomah of the Passamaquoddy Tribe, said the holiday would promote greater public awareness of American Indians’ contribution to national defense.

Penobscot Indian veterans honored at Army ceremony

By Meg Haskell - Bangor Daily News - December 11, 2009 With commendation certificates and letters signed by Army Chief of Staff Gen. George W. Casey Jr. and by Secretary of the Army John McHugh, the Penobscot Indian Nation’s historic support of the U.S. Army was recognized, from the Revolutionary War through the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Tribe member seeks separate Veterans Day

By Meg Haskell - Bangor Daily News - February 17, 2009 American Indians from Maine have served in every war since the American Revolution, according to decorated World War II veteran Charles Shay of Indian Island, and it is time they were honored for their heroism and patriotism.